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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (12/22): OBSTACLES TO PEACE  
NEGOTIATIONS

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Main Stories:  
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All papers lead with growing tension in Gaza where the truce with Israel ended and, the papers speculate, an Israeli offensive is becoming more inevitable. Al Ayyam and Al Hayat Al Jadeeda report that four Palestinians were injured December 21 in Israeli strikes on Gaza, from where a projectile was fired into Israel. To garner international support for a possible Gaza offensive, Palestinian papers report that Israeli embassies have launched an international public relations campaign, with a focus on Security Council member states. Al Ayyam recounts statements from senior Israeli officials calling for an Israeli offensive in Gaza, while Prime Minister Olmert called for self restraint, and anonymous Israeli security officials said that an offensive is definite and that they are just waiting for the "appropriate" time. Al Hayat Al Jadeeda notes that the situation in Gaza and Hamas rule of Gaza have become campaigning fodder for Israel's Likud party, with Netanyahu pledging to end Hamas rule. The Labor party's Ehud Barak downplayed such promises, the papers note.

On the humanitarian front, Al Ayyam reports that Egypt asked Hamas to establish 24 hours of calm in order to allow humanitarian assistance to enter into Gaza. The paper notes that Jordan's Islamic movement and Egypt's Red Crescent Society both have shipments prepared to send to Gaza. Al Quds reports bakeries in Gaza will gradually stop functioning within the next two days due to diminishing supplies of flour. While, Al Hayat Al Jadeeda publishes a photo of medics assisting an infant injured in Israeli strikes. Al Ayyam quotes Musheer Al Masri of Hamas denying any Arab overtures to Hamas to work to extend the truce or to resume the internal Palestinian dialogue. Al Quds quotes remarks made by Palestinian Authority Prime Minister

Fayyad questioning Israel's commitment to peace and vowing to continue lobbying for economic pressure to be put on Israel to stop settlement expansion. Fayyad said he was "discouraged" by a recent EU decision to upgrade its relations with Israel without demanding a freeze on settlement expansion.

All Palestinian papers report on "summit" meetings between PA President Abbas and Russian President Medvedev during which the two discussed the Middle East peace process and the Russian role in the Quartet and the Security Council.

Al Quds and Al Hayat Al Jadeeda give prominent coverage to a hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners in Israel's Ofer prison that entered its second day. The hunger strike comes following extensive clashes with prison guards over the weekend. The papers note growing Palestinian public support for the prisoners, adding that prisoners in Israel's Negev prison staged a token one meal hunger strike in solidarity with Ofer prisoners.

Al Quds mentions the likely selection of retired Admiral Dennis Blair as President-elect Obama's Director of National Intelligence. It notes that the Wall Street Journal commented that in selecting a former military officer for this post, Obama could create tensions between his civilian and military staff.

Al Hayat Al Jadeeda and Al Quds report that "Israeli Jews" vandalized a mosque in the Israeli city of Jaffa, writing intimidating and insulting slogans against the Prophet Mohammad. Al Hayat Al Jadeeda carries a photo of the defaced mosque on its front page.

Al Quds reports on concerns expressed by lawyers and human rights activists on a "systematic Israeli campaign" to displace Palestinian Bedouins from areas around Jerusalem in order to expand Israeli settlements. The activists consider the land being targeted as the

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only space available for future expansion by Palestinian Jerusalemites and have demanded pressure be brought to bear on Israel to stop these actions.

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WEEKEND STORIES  
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Sunday, December 21  
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Al Quds, Al Ayyam and Al Hayat Al Jadeeda report that violent clashes erupted Saturday morning at the Ofer detention center between Israeli guards and Palestinian prisoners, resulting in a number of injuries and the burning of tents where prisoners are currently being held. The clashes started when prisoners protested an earlier search of prisoner property which damaged the living quarters of the prisoners. In response to the protest Israeli soldiers fired rounds of rubber coated bullets and tear gas canisters at the prisoners, igniting some of the tents. President Abbas condemned the attacks against the prisoners at Ofer.

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Saturday, December 20  
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Al Quds reports that Sheikh Salhab, head of the Islamic Awqaf Council and acting Chief Justice, said in a special interview with Al Quds that Israeli violations against the sanctity of Al Aqsa Mosque are increasing. These violations present themselves in the form of continuous attempts by settlers and fundamentalists to enter the mosque and hold prayers on its grounds under the protection of Israeli police. Salhab stressed that these violations are happening on an almost daily basis. Salhab added that over the past few months, the mosque witnessed several violent attacks.

Al Ayyam and Al Hayat Al Jadeeda report that 34 protestors, including an Israeli peace activist, as well as local and foreign journalists, were injured Friday during anti-wall protests in the villages of Bil'in, Ni'lin, Al Ma'sara, and Jayyous. Two residents of Bil'in were taken to a Ramallah hospital while the Israeli peace activist was taken to a hospital in Israel for treatment. Among the injured were a cameraman and two European journalists. Protestors in Bil'in and Ni'lin threw shoes at soldiers, who fired tear gas and stun grenades.

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BLOCK QUOTES:  
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¶1. The main editorial in Al Quds, "Prisoners once again," opines: "It is time for the Palestinian side to reject the Israeli position that deals with prisoners of freedom as criminal prisoners...it is time for European mediators, who always demand the release of [abducted Israeli soldier Gilad] Shalit, including France, to look at the facts of what is going on and to stop this hypocrisy and this double standard when dealing with human rights and the issue of prisoners... The issue of prisoners is an open wound that cannot be ignored, and there is no seriousness to peace negotiations or contacts with the Israeli side as long as Israel continues [its] practices."

¶2. Jawad Al Basheeti editorializes in Al Ayyam under the title "Truce...results, expectations and lessons!" that: "The US well knows which are the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in ¶1967. [T]he Palestinians (along with the Arabs) should know that there can be no serious negotiations ... without transferring authority over these territories from the Israeli occupying power to an interim international administration headed by the UN... such an administration, supported by a strong international military force,

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can, and should, continue until the two sides sign a peace agreement. Otherwise, the Palestinians will only succeed in undermining both of the current options: the negotiated solution and the solution through resistance."

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